

THE ANALOGY OF SCRIPTURE REVISITED: A FINAL FORM CANONICAL APPROACH TO SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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Introduction

THE RELATIONSHIP between biblical and systematic theology has been a tenuous one. This is not surprising considering that both theological disciplines seem to be in a state of continual flux. The mere mention of the categories immediately calls to mind unsettled issues, as fundamental as the definitions of the disciplines themselves.¹ Without reductionist conflation of these disciplines, this essay seeks their integration in the delineation of a prospective methodological outline toward a canonical systematic theology, one that is defensible, practicable, and may be carried out scientifically (though not scientistically).² Such an approach may fit well with the increasing emphasis on the theological interpretation of Scripture.³ To this end, the discussion of selected issues for this prospective methodological outline will revolve around two different, yet related sets of hermeneutical circles.

The first subset of two horizons consists of the interplay between the horizon of the text and that of the reader/interpreter. The second hermeneutical circle consists of the relation of the parts to the whole and vice versa in biblical hermeneutics. Both issues are of great import to any conception of biblical systematics. Further, a distinction between hermeneutical exegesis and phenomenological exegesis, and their interrelation, will be described in order to help address these hermeneutical circles. It is recognized from the outset that this brief presentation cannot do justice to the complexity and depth of the issues involved in its subject matter. Accordingly, the elements that are discussed are necessarily limited to little more than an overview. Nevertheless, I hope an overview may provoke thought and reflection.

1. A number of definitions exist, ranging from the mere description of the supposed theology of the biblical authors to the construction of contemporary theology that corresponds to Scripture. For an excellent summary of the wide diversity of conceptions of biblical theology of the OT see Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991).

2. Consider Maier's definition of "science" as "methodologically ordered reflection, making use of all available means, which can be executed and tested under the same condition by others." Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994), 40.

3. See, for instance, Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008); Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al., eds., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005).

I. A Canonical Approach

The Analogy of Scripture

The role of the Bible in theological construction has undergone considerable change over the millennia of Christianity. Early in the history of the Christian faith, Irenaeus supposed the necessity of regulative parameters for the theology which became known as the rule of faith, closely related to *traditio*, the passing down of the apostolic teachings. However, this blossomed into an expanded concept, Tradition, down through the ages.⁴ The primacy of Tradition was questioned (though not universally) by Martin Luther in respect to certain supposed perversions in sixteenth-century Christianity. While moving away from the structure of Tradition, Protestant theology seemed to once again require a regulative parameter in a fashion similar to early Christianity, thus Luther utilized the analogy of faith.⁵ John Calvin continued the reform by employing the analogy of Scripture.⁶ To some extent, this moved beyond the rule of theological construction and back to the text itself, in the spirit of Renaissance which had itself provided the environment for such a call back to the sources (*ad fontes*). This guideline for Christian theology proposed that Scripture interprets Scripture, at once encapsulating the primacy of the Bible for Christian theology and belief in its internal coherence and interdependence.⁷

Hundreds of years later, such approaches have fallen under harsh criticism. A host of questions surround a biblical approach to theology, especially the analogy of Scripture. The manner of Scriptural authority and its application to both biblical and systematic theology continues to be a contentious issue. A broad variety of views on the authority, reliability, and even exclusivity of Scripture exist, with significant histories in diverse streams of thought. Not only is the authority of Scripture as a source of theological information a topic of disagreement, the in/ability of humans to understand Scripture, or indeed any text, is of paramount importance. Does the analogy of Scripture

4. Irenaeus seems to utilize the "rule of faith" not as an authority over against Scripture but over against unscriptural theological perspectives (specifically diverse forms of Gnosticism). For him, tradition (*traditio* from *paradosis*) relates to the passing down of the genuine teachings of the apostles but not necessarily license for later Christian communities to supplement the apostolic teachings, as the concept of "Tradition" later expanded. See, for instance, John Behr, "The Word of God in the Second Century," *Pro Ecclesia* 9, no. 1 (2000), 246; John C. Peckham, "Epistemological Authority in the Polemic of Irenaeus," *Didaskalia* 19 (2008), 51-70.

5. For Luther, "the 'words of the faith' are those analogous to faith or in harmony with faith, so that they do not militate against religion or the basic concept of redemption." Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (ed. Jan Pelikan, et al.; 55 vols., Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 28:320. The priority of the rule of faith is evident when Luther writes, "wherever and by whomever some meaning which does not conflict with the rules of faith is brought forth, no one should reject it or prefer his own, even though his own is much more evident and harmonizes much better with the letter." Luther, *LW*, 10:462.

6. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. Henry Beveridge; Albany, Or.: Ages Software, 1996), 1.6-10 (Beveridge, 85-116). However, this was not a rejection of the rule of faith. For instance he writes, "To this analogy and comparison we are led by that rule of the apostle, in which he enjoins us to bring every interpretation of Scripture to the analogy of faith (Romans 12:3, 6)." Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.4 (Beveridge, 1348).

7. This became a hallmark of Protestant interpretation, for instance the Westminster Confession of Faith states, "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly. (2 Pet. 1:20-21, Acts 15:15-16)" *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1996), 1.9.

remain viable in the midst of contemporary issues regarding philosophical hermeneutics, exegetical methodology, biblical theology, and systematic theology?

Canonical Approaches in Competition

It is widely held that there should be some place in Christian theology for Scripture, though its precise function is disputed. Since postmodern epistemology has overcome the strictures of logical positivism, the selection of a starting point is necessary. This is not to say that all choices are equally appropriate but, rather, that it is not necessary (and perhaps not possible) to provide a defense of one's epistemological starting point *a priori*. In the case of Christian theology, then, it seems appropriate to select the biblical canon as a basis of Christian doctrine.⁸ The selection of the canon does not require an interpreter to presume that this is *the* correct basis for theology, but to merely allow for that possibility.

Variations of a canonical approach have garnered considerable prominence in discussions regarding the nature of biblical theology, with numerous scholars promoting "canon" as the foundation of doctrine.⁹ These canonical approaches are known by many different names including: canonical hermeneutics, canonical criticism, canonical theology, et al. Such monikers may be grouped loosely under the rubric of canonical approach but it should not be assumed that such canonical approaches are identical.¹⁰ The essential similarity is the focus on canon as the object of study, though even the meaning of "canon" varies.

James Sanders and Brevard Childs have led in elevating the issue of canon to prominence in recent decades. Sanders calls his approach canonical criticism, which focuses on the community process of canon (its writing, redaction, collation, preservation, and determination) and canonical hermeneutics (meaning as defined by the contemporary community).¹¹ In his view, the canon is fluid, consisting of the community input and tradition from every stage of its history with the current community continuing to function as canon arbiter. Childs, on the other hand, promotes the primacy of the final canonical form, in which the "entire history of Israel's interaction with its

8. The selection of Scripture is admittedly a presupposition, the validity of which is open to question. Although it is beyond the scope of this work to justify Scriptural authority, there are plausible reasons for the selection, not least of which is Scripture's self-testimony as well as the conviction of a vast number of Christians that attribute some degree of authority to Scripture.

9. Paul McGlasson believes the "future of dogmatic theology" depends upon "the issue of canon." *Invitation to Dogmatic Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2006), 15. Kevin Vanhooser likewise, suggests that the fuller meaning of Scripture "emerges only at the level of the whole canon." *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), 264. Cf. Charles J. Scalise, *From Scripture to Theology: A Canonical Journey into Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 81.

10. Considerable variety exists, see Anthony C. Thiselton, "Canon, Community, and Theological Construction," in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Craig G. Bartholomew, et al.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006), 4; Christopher Seitz, "The Canonical Approach and Theological Interpretation," in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Craig G. Bartholomew, et al.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006), 58.

11. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism*, 21. See also James A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 17-20. Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1990); Marvin Tate, "Promising Paths toward Biblical Theology," *Review and Expositor* 78 (1981), 179-80.

traditions is reflected in the final text.¹² While Sanders' canonical criticism explicitly denies the primacy of the final form, shifting greater weight to the historical shaping as well as ongoing tradition and community input, Childs' thoroughly text-focused approach redirects attention to the final form of the canon as object of interpretation, allowing him to emphasize the interrelationship of the parts and the whole of the canon as a unified document.¹³ This difference seems to stem from the underlying definition of canon, on the one hand that of a community formed and determined canon, on the other of a community received and recognized canon.¹⁴

The Nature and Function of Canon

Thus, two important issues arise: (1) the scope of the biblical canon, and (2) the "final form" of that canon. I suggest that a great deal of the conflict of interpretations relates to the philosophical matter of whether canon is a community determined or community recognized corpus. If the community has the authority to determine the canon it would seem reasonable to afford ongoing authority to the community whereas if it does not, the canon retains theological primacy.¹⁵ Without requiring a dogmatic answer to this issue, the approach of this essay selects the canon of sixty-six books which is recognized most widely throughout Christianity.¹⁶ Other approaches call for expanded emphasis on both the historical and contemporary community, which may include a return to Tradition as an indispensable source for confessional dogmatics and increased importance of the contemporary community with regard to the reception, interpretation, and articulation of theology.¹⁷

12. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 54.

13. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism*, 31. Further, Sanders has serious problems with Childs' synchronic view of the text. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism*, 35. See Brevard S. Childs, "Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem," in *Beiträge Zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift Für Walther Zimmerli* (Geburstag: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1977), 80-93; Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 189-91.

14. Childs sees canon as something to be recognized, not imposed, while Sanders's definition of canon is a community determined corpus. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 105; Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism*, 15.

15. To be sure this is an oversimplification and numerous approaches suggest nuance to overcome the dichotomy. The primary question is, does the community have the authority to determine the canon or is the canon granted authority as a theological document by God which is afterward recognized by a given community? See John C. Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority: A Critical Comparison of Two Models of Canonicity," *Trinity Journal* 28NS, no. 2 (2007).

16. While some may include other books/traditions this approach would readily find wide agreement on the books that are included. For instance, the 39 books of the OT are accepted as canonical nearly universally amongst Judaism and Christianity. The 27 NT books are also accepted across Christian denominations.

17. McGlasson, for example, attributes a great deal of importance to the community in theological construction by utilizing the concept of "tradition 1" which grants sole authority to the Bible but with the stipulation that Scripture be interpreted in and by the community. Conversely, he rules out "tradition 2" which moves from the single source view to posit tradition as a second source alongside of Scripture. McGlasson, *Invitation to Dogmatic Theology: A Canonical Approach*, 130-32. For a presentation of the categorization between "tradition 1" and "tradition 2" see Heiko A. Oberman, "Scripture and Tradition: Introduction," in *Forerunners of the Reformation* (New York: Hold, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 54-56. Others, of course, question the selection of canon altogether, considering it to stem from an arbitrary anachronism. Heikki Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme* (London: SCM Press, 1990).

The canonical approach of this study, however, reserves primacy for the canon in direct contrast to the increasing popularity of turning toward tradition/community for confessional systematics. It holds that the legitimate *traditio*, which recognizes the importance of the community as receptor and preserver, is built into the final form canon itself. Thus, this canonical approach is interested in historical context to the extent that it is relevant to the canonical context, while avoiding basing theological conclusions on decisions between speculative reconstructions of tradition history.¹⁸ Thus, the canonical text itself holds undiluted priority, without excluding either traditional or contemporary community voices from dialogue, but valuing both as *commentary*. In this way, canonical systematic theology has close affinity with the aforementioned analogy of Scripture.

One might ask, however, whether the canon has support for its own selection as the object of theological inquiry. Importantly, the canon gives numerous examples suggestive of something like a canonical approach.¹⁹ While an implicit intention in the Bible to be read as “canon” does not itself prove the legitimacy of its canonicity, it does provide the necessary condition for a canonical approach. Yet, the question remains, what is the nature of the “final form” in this approach? As has been seen, Sanders believes the “final form” is a mistaken approach in that “there were numerous ‘final’ forms.”²⁰ To be sure, the question of the final form of the text includes a great deal of complexity, requiring considerable care. As a working approach it seems reasonable to approach the canonical text in the extant form(s) that we have, admitting the lack of access to a complete, original, final form.²¹ This final

18. This is not intended to frame the historical disciplines in a pejorative light but to recognize the fluidity of theories that remain in a high level of flux and uncertainty. Cf. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 359. Nevertheless, emphasis on the final form need not entail neglect of the canon’s diachronic elements. Consider the concept of epigenetic growth, Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, 8.

19. Specifically, it seems that at least some authors believed that their messages possessed a continuing, authoritative function, suggesting the notion of canon in the limited sense of “rule” or “standard.” For instance, Moses, per divine instruction (Ex 17:14) wrote the law and gave it to the priests (Deut 31:9) to encourage the people “to be careful to observe all the words of this law” (Deut 31:12), a charge which continued to function centuries thereafter (1 Kings 2:3; Cf. Josh 1:8; 23:6; Neh 8:8-18; 9:3). The prophets continually called the people to “hear the word of the Lord” (Amos 3:1; Jer 2:4; Ezek 6:3; Hos 4:1). Perhaps the capstone statement of the OT comes from Is 8:16, 20, “Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples . . . To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.”

In the NT, the supposition of a “rule” or “standard” is likewise noticeable in repeated appeals to OT writings as authoritative (Rom 4:3), including appeals to “Scripture” and “it is written” recurrent in the words of Jesus (Matt 4:4-10; 11:10; 26:24; Mark 12:10; Luke 4:21; 10:26; John 7:42; 10:35 et al). Jesus utilized Moses and all the prophets to explain “the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27, 44; Cf. Matt 5:17-18). Elsewhere he taught that the Scriptures testify of him, thus one who believes Moses should believe Jesus (John 5:39, 46-47) and hear and do his words (Matt 7:24, 26). Other NT writers also expected ongoing authority for their writings. For instance, Paul exhorts, “retain the standards of sound words which you have heard from me” (2 Tim 1:13; Cf. 2 Thess 2:15; 3:14; Tit 1:9; 2 John 9-10; Jude 3). In continuity with the OT, Paul contends that he believes “everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets” (Acts 24:14; Cf. 2 Cor 4:2). As such, belief should be in accordance with the gospel preached by the apostles, which is itself received from the Lord (Gal 1:8-12). The NT further provides evidence of reception by the nascent Christian community. The Bereans are commended for their commitment to the Scriptures (Acts 17:13) and Paul is thankful “that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God” (1 Thess 2:13).

20. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism*, 25.

21. “The process of shaping is now unrecoverable historically, but the effect of shaping on the literature is precise and comprehensive” in the final form. McGlasson, *Invitation to Dogmatic Theology: A Canonical Approach*, 41. As Seitz puts it, “The final form—because it is not simply the most

form approach does not promote ignorance regarding the issues of textual criticism, but utilizes the discipline wherever its findings bear on the canonical meaning of the text. Accordingly, attention will not be diverted to a non-manuscript based reconstruction of the text based on form, source, or tradition criticism because of the unavoidably conjectural nature of such undertakings. Therefore, this approach gives less consideration to isagogics and more consideration to textual and intertextual hermeneutics, focusing on the final form of the sixty-six book canon without neglecting textual issues that pertain to extant texts from this canon.²²

Furthermore, this text-based emphasis entails caution against the tendency to synthetically harmonize texts and flatten their meaning.²³ On the contrary, the appeal to the canon as the object of interpretation includes a high regard for the details included in that canon. The canonical approach is thus a text-based *and* text-controlled approach, which examines the canonical text to decipher meaning, in the spirit of the reformer's call back to the sources. Yet, emphasis on the text does not merely amount to an annotated exegetical outline. Rather, the systematic theologian plays a vital role in asking questions of the text, while deliberately requiring justifiable and discernible answers from the text. Now that the broad contours of a canonical approach have been mentioned, let us turn attention toward its application to systematic theology.

II. A Canonical Systematic Approach

The meaning of "system" in this approach refers to a collection of working parts that contribute to and compliment the whole. The supposition of a canonical "system" transcends exegesis because it looks beyond (without overlooking) the limits of individual texts and pericopes, toward the entire canon. It transcends biblical theology in that it endeavors to be more than a compilation and summary of fragmentary exegesis. A canonical systematic approach looks for the patterns and inner logic of the *texts* in relation to the whole canonical *text*. However, "system" is not sought at the expense of the particular complexity of individual texts. The approach does not require a dichotomy between limited pericope and broad overarching reading but embraces both in mutual reciprocity.

As system this approach utilizes the questions and analytical tools of philosophy while intentionally moving the grounding of system away from the answers provided by philosophical traditions and back toward the canon it-

recent level of tradition, but is the aggregation of the entire history of the text's development, now in a given form—has a claim to our greatest attention." Seitz, "Canonical Approach," 102.

22. This is not intended to rule out the disciplines of isagogics or other disciplines which rely on reconstruction as appropriate or helpful, but to delimit (at least initially) the construction of the canonical system to the text. See Meir Weiss, *The Bible from Within: The Method of Total Interpretation* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1984).

23. A method of analogy "can lead to an overemphasis on the unity of biblical texts," resulting in "artificial conformity" that ignores the diversity of expression and emphasis between divergent statements in the Bible." D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1983), 361. Cf. James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999); John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996). While I share concern regarding the glossing over details and intricacies of the text(s), I challenge the presupposition that doctrinal reading necessarily results in reductionism or worse. Cf. Daniel J. Treier, "Scripture, Unity Of," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, et al.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 733.

self.²⁴ Consequently, a canonical system draws its content and answers from Scripture, requiring the product of exegesis (biblical data) as material condition of the system. However, it also goes beyond the limitations of that product to try to ascertain the undergirding suppositions that form the context for the passage(s) and uncover the implied presuppositions that structure the worldview (metaphysical framework) of the canonical system. At all times, however, the framework that the interpreter attempts to derive from the text remains open to criticism. The system should never be permitted to overbear the text(s) and must consciously avoid the imposition of a canon within the canon, rather engaging the entire canon without dogmatic discrimination.²⁵

Canonical Coherence

This approach proposes that adequacy depends upon two parallel criteria, analogous to two of the highly influential theories of truth: correspondence and coherence. While it is widely agreed that coherence is a necessary guideline to truth, it is insufficient to presume that coherence is the only valid criteria. For instance, short of exhaustive knowledge it seems plausible that various coherent, and yet mutually exclusive, systems could be constructed and at least appear equally coherent. For any system, then, coherence is a necessary, but not sufficient, criteria for adequacy. A canonical system intends not only internal coherence but correspondence to the canonical text as its object of interpretation.

The criterion of coherence for a canonical system raises the question regarding the internal coherence of the canonical texts themselves since some maintain that far from being a unified, internally consistent, document, the canon contains irreconcilable incongruities and contradictions.²⁶ Is there any rationale for approaching the canonical text, written by numerous authors in diverse times and places, as mutually consistent and complementary? It seems no more reasonable to propose *a priori* that the canon is incongruous than to arbitrarily presuppose that the canon is in every way complementary. Rather, the consistency or the inconsistency of the canon (as any document) should be recognized by examination and interpretation of the canon itself (*a posteriori*). In this way, the canonical approach chooses to implement, as far as possible, the canon's own claims to complementarity, sympathetically looking for coherence and consistency in the text without uncritically assuming its presence. Where apparent tensions arise they should be properly acknowledged rather than glossed over. However, it should likewise be recog-

24. Fernando Canale contends that philosophy "still appears as the main provider of the 'system' or intellectual framework for the development of Protestant theology." *Back to Revelation-Inspiration: Searching for the Cognitive Foundation of Christian Theology in a Postmodern World* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 53. Childs adds, "For systematic theologians the overarching categories are frequently philosophical. The same is often the case for biblical scholars even when cloaked under the guise of a theory of history." Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 158.

25. Such an approach evokes criticism from those who suppose that all theological communities utilize a canon within a canon. See Eugene Ulrich, "The Notion and Definition of Canon," in *The Canon Debate* (ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 29; Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*; Dunn, "Has the Canon a Continuing Function?"; Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective*. This canonical approach, however, proposes that whatever community constructs that may function as a canon within a canon be continually corrected according to the canonical text itself.

26. Sanders contends, "Consistency is a mark of small minds. It can also be a manipulative tool in the hands of those who insist that the Bible is totally harmonious, and that they alone sing the tune!" Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism*, 46.

nized that apparent tensions do not necessarily rule out undergirding theological consistency, especially if consistency is not improperly conflated with simplistic univocity.²⁷

The considerable diversity and polyphony of the text does not necessarily amount to a disharmonious cacophony of voices.²⁸ Although tensions exist between broad themes of Scripture as well as the interpretation of isolated texts, there remains the possibility that further study and reflection may witness perceived contradiction give way to a more complex, and even beautiful, underlying harmony.²⁹ In this way, faithful attention to the diversity in Scripture itself points the interpreter back to the text to seek understanding that progressively expands in depth and breadth. Accordingly, honest and careful engagement of the diversity within the texts in themselves, as well as the text as canon, may steadily and increasingly illumine the goal of theology proper, the unending quest to know God. As such, the considerable diversity that is apparent throughout the canon should not only be acknowledged, but enthusiastically embraced.

Furthermore, this canonical approach recognizes the importance of historical context which, when ascertainable, may make vital contributions to theological understanding. The canonical context itself constitutes an aspect of historical context since earlier parts of the canon provided the framework and contributed to the shaping of later parts of the canon. For example, when Isaiah calls for correspondence to the “law and to the prophets” he is appealing to a “canon” as the context of proper prophetic speech (Is 8:20). The canonical approach sees this as a fundamental feature of all canonical writings, they are written from within the stream of the preceding canonical writings that influenced and shaped the pre-understanding of successive canonical authors who consciously intended faithfulness to preceding canonical writings. Therefore, it is logical that the canon itself presumes congruity.³⁰ This does not necessarily mean that congruity exists, nor does it exclude diversity and multivalency, but nevertheless points to the legitimacy of looking for coherence in the canon.

For the purposes of this method it seems reasonable to suspend judgment regarding the overall coherence of the Bible. By this I mean the interpreter can attempt to look for objective, justifiable ways that the text may be harmonized with its various parts. However, this should be done with a great

27. In my view, the kind of reverse proof-texting that is often intended to prove the disunity of Scripture is no more helpful than an out of context proof text, both may equally ignore textually conveyed and controlled intentions.

28. I. Howard Marshall helpfully suggests a number of ways to approach the variety of Scripture including: considering the tension “totally irresolvable,” carefully examining the potential disagreements and determining whether they are in harmony, and determining whether there might be an “underlying unity,” despite a “different level of perception.” *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 30.

29. The hypothesis of a “master weaver” that has woven a coherent message into Israel’s history presents a recent example of finding congruity behind and beyond formerly suggested discontinuity in the OT canon, while still seeing significant diversity in the interwoven texts. In this view, “the final redaction of the whole work was based on a master plan with a visible internal structure to which the full narrative, with all of its colorful details, is tied. It also shows that the whole work, almost exactly half of the Hebrew Bible, was the end product of [a] single mind or compiler (or a very small committee, like the one that produced the famous King James Version of the Bible).” David Noel Freedman, Jeffrey C. Geoghegan, and Michael M. Homan, *The Nine Commandments: Uncovering a Hidden Pattern of Crime and Punishment in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 164.

30. Maier contends that “biblical writers seek consciously to recede into the background. They point away from themselves to *God as the author* of their message.” Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 22.

deal of caution. There is never license to change the text to fabricate harmony; the text must be allowed to speak for itself. Like other questions asked of the text, this aspect is deliberately submitted to the range of meaning allowed by the text. In this way, the interpreter may look first for potential coherence in the text as canon and where coherence is elusive it should be honestly noted. All the while recognizing that regarding some matters it may not be necessary to make any exclusive decision but, rather, to admit the various options that cannot, as of yet, be ruled in or out. The criterion of coherence thus looks for congruity among the canonical texts while conscientiously dealing with areas of perceived or apparent tension.

Canonical Correspondence

Without broaching epistemological debates regarding foundationalism proper, this approach extracts its basic premise: correspondence of meaning to some object, or source of data. In accordance with the prior selection of canon as object of interpretation this approach seeks discernible correspondence to the canonical text. Too often theologians may neglect exegetical research, isolating their theological construction from exegetical considerations. Without due consideration to biblical exegesis, systematics runs the risk of amounting to merely erudite presentation of internal coherence and rhetorical persuasiveness. Consequently, an approach that lacks the control of the canon often amounts to a restatement of tradition within the flux of ever-changing historical contexts that demand fresh interpretation articulation.

Conversely, exegesis has its own tendency to neglect a systematic view of the text which may leave exegetes unintentionally beholden to systematic presuppositions that unduly affect their interpretation. A canonical system thus seeks to avoid such pitfalls by integrating elements of both approaches under the primacy of canon. Ideally, one would prefer perfect correspondence to the text. However, recognition of the potential liabilities for any human interpreter (for instance, individual background and presuppositions) requires the more attainable goal of discernible, demonstrable, and defensible correspondence.³¹ In other words, while acknowledging the ever-present element of human subjectivity, the canonical systematic approach seeks the maximum achievable correspondence to the text.

But this raises questions regarding the nature of the text. For instance, is there intention *in* the text? What is the interpreter attempting to correspond to, authorial intent or something else? The deconstructionist perspective locates meaning in the interpreter, or interpretive community, as opposed to in the text itself.³² A more moderate approach locates meaning in a "fusion" of the textual and interpreter's horizons. This approach posits a hermeneutical circle wherein both text and interpreter bring content to the interpretation reciprocally and the meaning of the text thus goes far beyond

31. Thus, as differentiated from reader response theories a canonical reading "shares a concern for the objective reality of the text and for its intentional direction and ruled character . . ." Seitz, "Canonical Approach," 100.

32. The criticism of Derrida and subsequent reader response theories, such as that of Fish, posit that meaning resides not in the text but with the reader. See Stanley Eugene Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).

that of elusive authorial intention.³³ A third, more traditional approach, maintains the emphasis on determinate meaning according to authorial intention.³⁴ In this third approach it is often supposed that the “author’s original meaning” is unchanging whereas significance changes over time.³⁵

Although a full engagement with the complexities of these perspectives is far beyond the scope of this essay, the canonical approach seeks the intention “in” the text which is the effect of the author’s intention (cause) in writing that text.³⁶ In this view, the text inscripturates, to some degree, the author’s intention, but no human author conveys intended meaning exhaustively. Thus, as inscripturated, the text itself is not identical to the complexity, comprehensiveness and fullness of the intention in the author’s consciousness at the precise time of writing.³⁷ The prospective interpreter possesses *only* the inscripturation of the author’s intention, that is, the text, which encapsulates the entirety of recoverable meaning. Hence, this approach recognizes the inaccessibility of the author’s consciousness at the moment of writing (the fullness of which is lost even to the author in subsequent moments) which makes an appeal to intent beyond or behind the text speculative.

Nevertheless, the text should be read with the recognition that the author is the unquestioned cause of the text, which was written for some purpose.³⁸ There is a determinate meaning that the author intended to convey in the text, notwithstanding the likelihood that the interpreter is incapable of

33. It thus recognizes some intention in the text as a contributor to meaning as opposed to authorial intention proper. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall; New York: Continuum, 2004). Gadamer considers it impossible that the reader fully recover the meaning of the text objectively since the horizon of the interpreter always contributes to the interpretation due to one’s historically effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*). For a variation of the issue of the horizon or intention of the text see Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 30.

34. See E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). Hirsch believed that the text always has a determinate meaning based on the author’s intent. More recently, Kaiser posits that “the author’s intended meaning is what a text means” and thus the sole task of the expositor is to clearly, accurately, and adequately (though not necessarily perfectly) describe authorial intent. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching*, 33, 47. However, the attempt to reach the author’s intent has been roundly criticized, consider the seminal article William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 3-18.

35. Thus, significance “does and must change since interests, questions, and the times in which the interpreter lives also change. But an author’s original meaning *cannot* change—not even for himself!” Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching*, 32.

36. I purposely say *in* the text to distinguish from the approach that looks for the authorial intent as well as that which imprecisely looks for the intention “of” the text. As Wolterstorff points out, “there is no such thing as the sense of a text.” Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 172.

37. As Jean Grondin states, “It is entirely pointless to try to reconstruct the unconscious process of thought production that occurs in composition.” *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 73. Nevertheless, as Christopher Tuckett points out, one must at least know the intended language in order to know the meaning, for example of “pain” whether in English or French. Christopher M. Tuckett, *Reading the New Testament: Methods of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 160.

38. Vanhoozer mentions that pebbles formed by waves into words would not be considered text by anyone. Rather, text requires an ordering agent, an author. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 109. Further, “The author is the historical cause of a textual effect; his or her intention is the cause of the text being the way it is. No other explanation adequately accounts for the intelligibility of texts.” *Ibid.*, 44. However, I would add that though the text is clearly the product of the authorial intent they may not be identical. Cf. Vincent Brümmer, *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982).

capturing the entirety of that intended meaning. It is thus the task of the interpreter to ascertain the intent that is preserved and discernible in the text and thereby interpret the meaning *in* the text, insofar as possible while in keeping with the textual controls that delimit the justifiable scope of interpretation. To this extent, I am a hermeneutical (critical) realist³⁹ while recognizing that the interpreter brings his/her own horizon to the text such that explicating the meaning in the text is an imperfect, complex, and continual process, which the interpreter must recognize and apply in an ongoing hermeneutical spiral.⁴⁰ Thus, while there is an objective standard (the text), the interpreter may never attain that standard perfectly in interpretation. This highlights the importance of the mutually correcting, reciprocally influential, hermeneutical spiral between text and reader/interpreter. Although the aim of this (or any) methodological approach does not mean that it arrives at its goal, the interpreter is responsible for recognizing the limitations of her horizon which should be purposely subjected to the text.⁴¹

III. The Hermeneutics of a Canonical Systematic Approach

Hermeneutical and Phenomenological Exegesis

This hermeneutical spiral which continually subjects the interpreter's horizon to criticism and correction by the text is further clarified by a discussion of exegetical methodology. Here, a couple of definitions proposed by Fernando Canale must be introduced.⁴² Hermeneutical exegesis will here refer primarily to the philological and historical dimensions of the exegetical method, essential to the task of locating the range of the specific meaning in the text.⁴³ Phenomenological exegesis refers to interpretation that goes beyond the limited pericope to seek the horizon of the text which also impacts textual meaning.⁴⁴ In brief, then, phenomenological exegesis consists of looking for the first principles (metaphysical framework) that are implicit in the text as canon. This interpretive task is crucial due to the recognition that each interpreter brings presuppositions and idiosyncrasies. This has significant impact on the discipline of exegesis which traditionally overlooks the issues of the presupposed metaphysical framework of both the text and the reader.

39. Hermeneutical realism posits that there is meaning in the text that exists objectively (independent of the interpreter. See Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 26; Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*; Stephen Mailloux, "Rhetorical Hermeneutics," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1985).

40. See Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 392.

41. That the text is distinguished from its author and from its interpreter(s) need not lead to separation or autonomy, but differentiation. As Grondin states, "The goal of understanding better, conceived in terms of an unreachable telos and the impossibility of complete understanding, bears witness to the fact that the endeavor to interpret more deeply is always worthwhile." *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 71.

42. Canale, *Back to Revelation-Inspiration*, 149.

43. For example, consider Douglas K. Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

44. See Canale, *Back to Revelation-Inspiration* 148. Importantly, a phenomenological method is here distinguished from the ontological suppositions of Husserl, namely the premise that reality is grounded in human perception as opposed to reality independent of human consciousness. Rather, it refers to the oftentimes assumed pre-understanding that must itself be reconsidered and reshaped by the canonical text in order to move toward a fully canonical system. "In short, the books within the biblical canon form a 'separate cognitive zone' and are 'interrelated like the parts of a single book.'" Kermode, "The Canon," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, 605-606 quoted in Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 134.

Specifically, the usual approach to exegesis begins with a limited pericope, seeks the historical and literary context, etc. However, the interpreter (wittingly or unwittingly) brings a horizon, including a pre-understanding of the first principles (metaphysics), which constitutes the environment of meaning. The exegetical product may be significantly influenced when the interpreter relies upon philosophical (or other) pre-understandings of reality rather than seeking to apply the metaphysical framework assumed by the inner logic of the text. For instance, an interpretation predicated on methodological naturalism would be hard pressed to preserve even the spirit, much less the letter, of the miracle-filled account of the Exodus which assumes supernatural theism. A method that precludes a supernatural metaphysical framework for the meaning of the text—regardless of opinion regarding its correspondence to historical reality—has subverted its own attempt to understand the canonical intention.⁴⁵ Thus, phenomenological exegesis seeks to ascertain the canonical horizon to provide the first principles (metaphysics) for exegetical interpretation.⁴⁶

Further, a canonical systematic approach focuses on the hermeneutical circle between the parts and the whole as well as the hermeneutical circle between text and interpreter. Accordingly, within the canonical approach, phenomenological exegesis tries to keep in mind the horizon of the canonical text while hermeneutical exegesis focuses on the pericope which itself contributes to and corrects the wider metaphysical framework in an ongoing reciprocal relationship, never attempting to reduce the multivalency of the text, but seeking a wider context that preserves it. Concomitantly, it brackets out, as much as possible, the interpreter's pre-understanding in favor of the pre-understanding required by the text in its pericope as well as the text as canon, thus allowing the canon to provide its own metaphysical framework. Thus, while looking at the text hermeneutically to ascertain the textual intent it also looks for the biblical ontological suppositions that provide the framework for the text's communication. In this way, phenomenological exegesis and hermeneutical exegesis function concurrently in an ongoing, reciprocally correcting manner.⁴⁷

Much more than providing merely a glorified exegetical outline or summary, the systematic theologian plays a vital role in asking questions of the text while deliberately requiring answers from the text, continually seeking the inner logic of the canon. This canonical systematic approach steers clear of a dichotomy between what the text meant and what it means in favor of a wholistic canonical approach, seeking the meaning that is preserved *in* the text as received. The metaphysical framework, in phenomenological exegesis, arises in communication with and dependence upon the text. It is in the words of the text itself where the phenomenological questions are applied and answered. Thus, although phenomenological answers are logically prior

45. As Thiselton points out, "Non-theism or positivism is no more value-free than *theism*." Thiselton, "Canon, Community, and Theological Construction," 4.

46. "Inner coherence should drive Christian theology to conceive and formulate its presuppositional structure employing a biblical rather than philosophical or scientific interpretation." Canale, *Back to Revelation-Inspiration*, 149.

47. For Silva "the context does not merely help us understand meaning; it virtually *makes* meaning." Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994), 139. If the context indeed determines meaning then it is essential that the interpreter examine the proper context. How much more, then, should the canonical context be considered and enter into the determination of meaning?

to hermeneutical ones, they are actually recognized from within the ongoing, reciprocal, correcting task of interpretation.

Conclusion

In summary, this canonical systematic approach utilizes the final form sixty-six book canon as source in the rigorous quest for a coherent system which corresponds to the text, as nearly as is achievable. It utilizes both hermeneutical exegesis and phenomenological exegesis in order to provide canonical-textual answers to philosophical and theological questions. The systematic conclusions themselves remain tentative, continually subject to the recurring hermeneutical spiral where textual horizon judges interpreter's horizon as well as all current theological constructions. At each step this spiral is operative. The community that chooses to operate within such a framework may shed further light on where the interpreter's horizon or other human imperfection has perhaps erred, but is not itself authoritative over against the text. Moreover, the extracted canonical systematic theology is not the final word, the final form canonical text is the final word, and the system is thus always secondary and must always appeal back to the text. The methodology arrives only at tentative conclusions such that the text is never replaced by any theological construction but, rather, remains the locus of continual correction and re-correction. Hence, the system will never exhaust the canonical text but endeavors to persistently move toward thorough correspondence and rigorous inner coherence.